

REBEL DESTINY

196 gods do not come to them." There was in her voice con-
186 tempt for women who had no gods. She was of a reddish-
brown color, taller and more slender than most, and the
great coils of brass about her arms and ankles told that her
[301] beauty had had full recognition. These had come to her at
[585] marriage, as had the small earrings of gold which the bassia
had brought to her from French Guiana. With these, too,
had come cloths and handkerchiefs, beads and carvings.

629 If white women had no gods, did they know any of the
923 other things which women must know? Did the white
[291] woman wear an apron underneath all her cloths, as women
should? Were her thighs cicatrized? Did she cook for her
husband, or other men, when she should be isolated in
the special house provided for women's monthly visits?
[841] Did she purify herself with sacred clay when she emerged
from isolation in order not to spoil her husband's obias, for
which contact with a woman who has her menses is the
deadliest taboo? Why, having borne children, did her
figure not show it?

[534] "Have you drums?" the bassia's wife asked. "Without
drums, how do you pray? How do you dance?"

[535] Dancing without drums availed nothing.

"White women have no gods. The gods do not come to
them. They are not troubled by the need to dance. White
women do not pray," she concluded, seeing that what
dancing the white woman did could only be a feeble affair.

"I will send my son to your country. The men who go
to the French shore say it is good to know how to count the
white man's way. My woman-child I will never send,"
she finished with finality.

Now it was the white woman's turn to ask a few ques-
tions, having done explaining how her boots laced, and why
it was that she was dressed very much as her husband was
dressed.

951 The white clay in the hair and on the face of a small
976 child was medicine. The child's mother had washed for her
983 god that morning. He was a god whose day for dancing was
Wednesday, and now, feeling the god stir in her, she would

A NIGHT AT S'EI

wash every day until Wednesday came to permit her to dance. When she washed with the sacred moistened clay, she rubbed the white on her children. 751
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"Will all the women dance on Wednesday who have the same god as you?"

The child's mother shook her head. "If the god comes to them, yea. If he doesn't come, they can't dance."

And the bassia's wife said, "The women who are in the menstrual house can't dance. When they hear the drums, they are troubled, but they must remain quiet." 841

The woman had spoken too eagerly and too loudly, 593
for her husband, overhearing her, said something in a low rapid voice, and at once the women fell silent and several of them remembered errands they had to see to.

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"When men are in the council house, you mustn't interrupt," said the bassia's wife to the white woman. 576
"If we did what you did just now, our husbands would scold us when they got home, and if we did it again, they would beat us." [593]

She had taken upon herself all the prerogatives of friendship, and continually criticized the manners of her visitor.

The old were to be greeted last. A gift was to be received by another. When returning a piece of carving to another's hand, the carving should rest on the outstretched palm, while the elbow of that arm lay on the palm of the other hand. In the presence of men, a woman who took a stool should turn it about and sit on its narrower side.

"Never sit on the bare earth. The spirits don't like it," she said one instant, and the next, "Don't play with your fingers on top of your sun helmet. Your breasts will get long. Drumming is not a thing for women." [576]
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There had been other warnings during earlier visits to Bush Negro villages, but none had borne down so heavily upon the shortcomings of the stranger.

THE GODS SPEAK

cloths, their hair disheveled, their faces without the glist 789
which the oil gave to their dark skins, and their eyes without the touch of dark flame which the gleaming skins brought out. One of these women stood leaning against a doorpost trembling. Her hands were clenched, and her mouth moved without pause, and without sound.

"She hears the agida!"

"Ai. She wants to dance, but she can't. Her god is troubling her."

The white woman must not stop with them longer, and she must not come closer, the two women who stood beside their quivering companion called out at once, for the obia which she wore about her neck would be contaminated if brought too close to them, and its power to protect the wearer against danger would leave it at once.

"Do not come too close. Tomorrow I will return to my house, and after I have bathed and washed in pemba, I will be clean again, and then I will come to see you," the younger of the two women said.

The other said, "When you go there," and she pointed toward the woman's path, "do not go by the way of the broken calabashes. That is the unclean way. It is the path 341 for the women who stay in this house."

Down the clearing the white woman continued until, 343
when she turned, the open cooking shelter of Bassia Anaisi's quarter faced her. The floor of the shelter was of red clay, raised well above the clearing itself. A woman was laying a fire there, putting down the long sticks one end close to the other in the center, so that they radiated outwards in what seemed a perfect circle. Her child, who was fitted out with obias on neck and wrists and right ankle, sat near by watching her, and playing with a gourd doll. 524

The voice of the agida had a moment before died down, and now a song reached the white woman. It came not from across the river, but from somewhere directly behind the houses grouped about the clearing beyond the cooking shelter. The song was a repetition of several melodic phrases, sung in varying rhythms, so that it had a disturb- 523

SARAMACCA OBIA

of the white man and blew on it, drawing both his hands lightly over the hands which held the obia. When he had done this, he whispered its tchina. 789
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"Do not let the obia come near a menstruating woman, and do not eat the meat of the crab." [E41]
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Types of obias varied. Some were of fiber twisted into a cord and woven into bands to fit an arm or, a leg, some were worn around the neck, and ended with a few cowries and a bell or a black sack with cowries sewn on them or some bristles and a brilliant bit of a parrot's feather. There were also the plain bands of iron, the Kromanti obias worn by men.

One of the most interesting obias was the coffin obia. It was not to be worn casually, as were all the others we had heretofore acquired. When our cook saw this one he paled.

"Mi Gado," he cried, and then turned to the English at his command to give us a warning which would not be understood by those who stood near. "What you got there? Put that away! You wan' fo' die?" Nor would he come near it until it was well out of sight.

It was, we saw, best hidden, if we wanted to continue our course up the river.

The man who had sold it had himself impressed us with its potency. "This obia is strong. . . . Look, it is made of cedar, the same wood from which we make the big coffins, and it is wrapped in the cloth we use to cover the coffin in which the dead man lies. Now that you have the power which is in the obia, I can tell you that the black on it is the soot from the fire, the white is pemba, and the inside ring is woven from the maripa palm. It will carry you well on the river. Nothing can harm you when you already carry your coffin with you." [F44]

The logic of his last remark was not so convincing to the whites as it was to the obia man, but it seemed unwise to question him about it.

"To keep it strong, you must spray it with rum twice a month. When the moon is full you must do it, and again

SARAMACCA OBIA

But if the tchina are too difficult to observe, then the man who made the obia can take the tchina away. 789
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Suiting his action to the word, Bayo took some water from the river into his mouth and, spraying it over the obia, said, "The tchina I gave you, I take away. The breaking of these tchina must no longer defile you or take away your power."

There was nothing more hateful to the gods and the spirit of obia than an unclean woman, yet if an obia man wished, he could instruct the power in the obia not to take offense at unintentional contacts with menstruating women, or at cloths belonging to such women, or at food prepared by such women. But to accomplish this, an obia man had to be very powerful and, even so, he could not feel sure that the obia spirit would countenance such violations indefinitely. 784
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All of these personal obias had definite attributes. One was made to guard an individual on the water, another in the bush. There were obias for successful hunting and fishing, for being safe against the evil spirits at the crossroads, for slander, and for envy. One obia saw to it that the soul remained strong, another that no illness sent by an enemy might lodge itself in the body of the wearer; there were love obias, and fighting obias, and obias which kept ghosts away. 787
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Yet whatever such obias were made of, the object in itself had no validity. A simple fiber with a jaguar's tooth attached to it might well have greater powers for safety in the bush than an elaborately wrought obia, whose maker had not a strong obia spirit to give it spiritual power. Without this supernatural potency, it would be like a village god that had been allowed to rot because of itself it was merely a block of wood, and the deity for whom it had been made had not come to animate it.

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Long ago, the Anansi stories tell us, there was a bird that knew obia. The cries of this bird shook all the kingdoms 773

[83] have a last look at the child's penis, as they will never see it again. Then the boy is proclaimed a man, and given clothes.

So far as could be observed, there is no circumcision of either the male or female, although such mutilations are indulged in by West African tribes in the region from which the Djukas came. The girls wear only the *coyo*, or a larger cloth known as *pengi*, until their first menstruation, when their mothers give them cloths. This is done in private. Menstruating women are required to leave their homes and retire [84] to a separate hut situated outside the village on a by-path; they may not return until three days after the period is over. Under no condition are they allowed to go to the provision fields during this time.

[584] At the age of about sixteen or seventeen the children are [532] ready to be married. Sometimes they are betrothed in infancy, and occasionally a pregnant woman will betroth her child before it is born, conditionally, of course, upon its sex. Once the child is betrothed the ceremony must take place, [754] otherwise the disappointed prospective mate will call down a *kunn*, or curse, on the entire perjured family, and they will all die. The pubescent child does not look forward to marriage as time for leaving its family, nor is marriage an [53] initiation into sex relations. For these two reasons, getting [543] married is not a serious step, and there is little illegitimacy because there is no reason for objecting to a marriage.

[858] Youths must remain *sandling* until their elders invite them [576] to be seated. It is customary for older people to receive much [888] respectful attention, for the older people are the sources of tradition and authority.

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[513] white cotton sleeping blanket, various colored cloths and panties, some earthenware, such as bowls and plates, iron pots and pans, and the like, while he is obligated on the occasion to provide for an ample supply of strong drink and sugar wine.

They do not have festivities, games, or dancing in connection with their marriages.

586 If a marriage is dissolved, then each of the two parties again goes to his own family; in case those concerned in it and the elders disapprove of this, however, it happens that man and wife are forced to continue to live with each other, especially when there are no substantial reasons and grievances.

593 The man is obligated to provide his wife or his wives with food, clothing, and ornaments; she, to follow the man everywhere, to look for him, to wash, and to take care of the house-keeping.

264 The wives are neat in an exemplary fashion; plates, bowls,
252 and pans are always kept extremely clean, and they also see to it that everything is extremely clean in connection with cooking.

• 841 If they find themselves in a period of menstruation, they
302 indicate this immediately to the husband by withdrawing from his dwelling and staying in seclusion with other women; they neither cook nor do the least thing for him in this state, do not even come within sight of him, and remain secluded to the end; when they have cleaned and dressed themselves, they decorate their shoulders and arms with white stripes as a token /16/ that they have again returned to their normal state. The stripes are made by mixing
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[924] pounded adroe (1) with ground chalk and water.

1. A tuberous root-stalk from the Cyperus rotundus L.

Sometimes they also smear the forehead and the neck in this way and appear thus before their husbands.

841 During their seclusion another woman, who is a member of
571 the family or possibly a female friend, daily prepares and brings the
252 food, which, however, is at the expense of the secluded wife. They perform this service for each other mutually.

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- 841 Woman's magic power. The Refugee Blacks assume that a woman, during her menstrual periods, is impure and has the power to destroy the power of obia. So during these periods she must withdraw into a special hut, mumu juu, and prepare her meals in special dishes; she may not prepare her husband's food, for by doing this she would destroy the power of his obia, and must abstain from touching objects he habitually uses, particularly his gun, which would lose its good points for shooting. Even in the little farming habitations which consist of only several huts, one may be sure that one of them serves as a mumu juu.

841 The mumu juu are very simple sheds built by the women themselves, using reclaimed materials taken from huts being demolished; some belong to one woman only; for others, three or four women get together. They have recourse to men only for assembling the framework, remunerating them with several cans of coac or several baskets of yams.

- 841 /255/ A man who has a powerful obia like the man nenge obia must abstain from speaking to a woman who has her menses.

(751) The Boni assume these are women wicked enough to willfully hide their menses in order to destroy the power of a man's obia, but he who has a good man nenge obia cannot be a dupe: the iron circle warns him of the danger by squeezing his arm.

184 According to Mr. W. F. van Lier, the act of willfully
841 hiding her menses is for the Djuka one of the gravest offenses
68 a woman can commit, and the most severe punishments are
inflicted on her. It is not the same with the Boni: in such a
case a woman risks only being insulted and banned.

752 Another deeply rooted belief among the Refugee Blacks,
834 and which exists with many Creoles, is the necessity for the
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784 A... of the Dya lo, about 28 years old in 1958, must
262 observe six kina:

--The cayman and the jaguar as bwasi kina.

--The otter (yundu) as akka kina. /256/

These three kina have been imposed on him since his first years, but the meaning of them was explained to him only later on.

(751) --The eel (minsi) was imposed on him as a kina by his father when the latter gave him a man nŋ-ŋe obia, obia of protection against machete or gun, materialized by an iron bracelet.

(841) To this obia is attached another kina. A... must not
(834) speak to a woman having her menstrual period.

(751) --Finally, the crab (kaabu), kina attached to an obia
(187) of which the man concerned only spoke with reticence, probably a Kumŋnti bu (bracelet of Kumŋnti, instrument of divination).

A... has no gadu kina in the strict sense of the term.

There exists no food kina common to all the Boni; the cayman is generally forbidden to them as bwasi kina, associated with another animal; but this is not absolute; we know at least one Boni who has not received this kina.

If someone has broken a kina inadvertently, he can have himself cleansed of this offense by obiasman. But if he broke it wilfully, he cannot escape the punishment attached to the offense.

845 Beliefs about twins. They have the idea that twins and
221 children who follow twins are of a nature different from other men, participating in a divine principle.

(755) Twins cannot live (since they do not belong to ordinary humanity) if they are not treated with a special remedy known only to certain lineages especially rich in twins.